

Grasslands



Many people associate grasslands with pioneers who moved west across North America. Pioneers called these rolling landscapes of grasses and sedges prairies, and first encountered them after crossing the Mississippi River. Unlike Utah's grasslands, the grasslands found to the east of Utah are called tallgrass prairies because the greater rainfall they receive supports grasses as high as eleven feet tall. Utah's drier climate supports shortgrass prairies.

From songbirds soaring overhead to snakes slithering among the grasses, grasslands are rich with wildlife. Raptors often can be found gliding above the grass, searching for small mammals such as mice, ground squirrels and prairie-dogs that occasionally emerge from their underground homes. While Utah's grasslands remain important wildlife habitat, these habitats are not as healthy as they were when the pioneers first encountered them.



Key Facts about Utah's Grassland Habitat:

Rare

Covering about three-and-a-half percent of Utah's land area, grasslands are not very abundant in Utah.

Stable

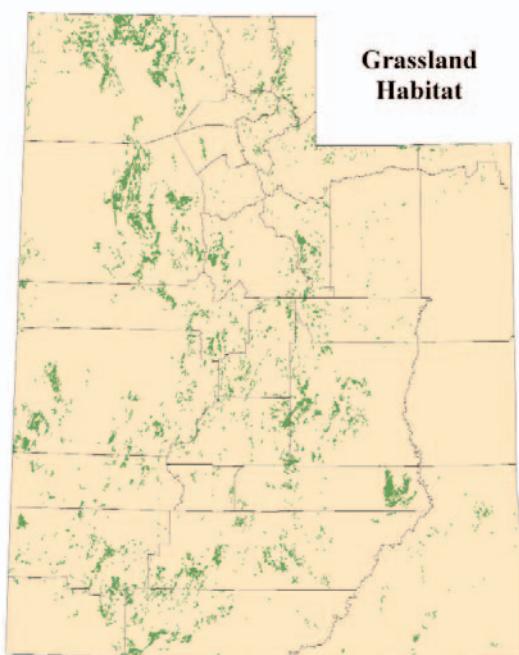
Biologists believe that Utah's grasslands are in a relatively stable condition, but some of the state's grasslands are feeling the effects of human activities.

Plant Life

The most abundant plants in grasslands are grasses, including wheatgrass, bluebunch and bluegrass, but you can also find wildflowers such as yarrow and Richardson's geranium here.

Animal Life

Grasslands are probably best known for the small mammals that call these habitats home, including black-footed ferrets and several species of prairie-dog.



Species on the Edge

The wildlife that calls grasslands home is threatened by a variety of human activities that are degrading their habitat. Because grasslands are home to 22 species of conservation need, protecting grasslands is a key to keeping these species healthy. The following are some of the many species in need of conservation in grasslands:

Tier One—Very High Concern

Black-footed ferret, Utah prairie-dog

Tier Two—High Concern

Long-billed curlew, grasshopper sparrow, Gunnison's prairie-dog, white-tailed prairie-dog

Tier Three—Moderate Concern

Idaho pocket gopher, coachwhip, glossy snake

What's Threatening Utah's Grassland Habitat?

Development—Many of Utah's grasslands have given way to human developments. Those that remain are often broken up by developments, leaving only a patchwork of grasslands that can be difficult for wildlife to navigate.

Improper grazing practices—Overgrazing threatens some grassland habitats.

Invasive plant species—Certain non-native plants, such as cheatgrass, have invaded grassland habitats and are outcompeting native grasses. Cheatgrass and other noxious weeds do not provide the food and cover that native wildlife depends upon.

Fire cycle alteration—Wildlife native to grasslands have adapted to a certain natural fire cycle. Cheatgrass and other invasive species, however, encourage more frequent fires, making it difficult for native wildlife to survive.



Black-footed ferret

Taking Action

Protecting Utah's grasslands will require coordinated action among a variety of partners across the state.

Conservation Actions

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources has identified the following key actions needed to protect Utah's grasslands:

1. Ensure proper grazing practices are implemented.
2. Restore degraded habitats and work to permanently conserve healthy grasslands.
3. Restore natural fire cycles where possible.
4. Remove invasive plants, plant desirable vegetation and educate the public about how to help prevent the spread of invasive plants.

Conservation Partners

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources is working closely with the grazing industry, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, the Utah Association of Conservation Districts, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, local governments, USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service and others to protect grasslands.